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Book Review: 'Jew And Greek: A Study in the Primitive Church' by Gregory Dix

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BOOKS

Gregory Dix: JEW AND GREEK

A STUDY IN THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH *

THE first Christians worshiped in the Temple (Ac 2:46). Peter himself and John the beloved of Jesus were frequenters of that Holy Place (Ac 3). When Peter preached Jesus to the crowds of Jerusalem, it was as the "Just One" described by Isaiah the prophet (Chap. 53), and in this he was followed by Stephen and Philip (Ac 3:14; 7:52; 22:14) and, the presumption is warranted, by all the other Jewish disciples of Jesus. James, the cousin of Jesus and the first bishop of Jerusalem, was, we assume from extra-biblical but reliable sources, a priest of the Mosaic Law, and he may have continued as such all his life.¹ The Christians of Jerusalem distinguished themselves from their brothers in the Holy City by a daily "breaking of bread in their houses," but even the ritual prayers that accompanied this earliest of all Mass-types conformed closely to the centuries-old Jewish benedictions which these Jewish followers of Jesus had used all their lives and heard the Master use Himself. But one hundred years later the Temple in Jerusalem was the site of a pagan shrine. Jewish Christians who continued to observe the Mosaic Law were ever diminishing in number, while their Gentile Christian neighbors looked upon their practices as strange inconsistencies. By then the eucharistic prayers were almost identical with those said in the Canon of the Mass today, and Jesus was far better known as the Incarnate Word of God than as the Suffering Servant foretold by Isaiah. What had happened? Was this "astonishing leap from one world to another" (p. 4), as the late Anglican scholar Dom Gregory

* New York: Harper & Bros., 1953.

1. That James was a priest of the Mosaic Law seems the best interpretation of Hegesippus's account of him, found in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* II, xxiii, 6: there we are told that he was permitted to enter the sanctuary and that he was often found alone in the Temple, praying for the forgiveness of the people. Cf. Tillemont, *Mémoires*, I, 286, note 10; and J. Chaine, *L'Épître de saint Jacques* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1927), pp. xxxiv, xxxv. Catholic exegetes today agree that those priests of the Mosaic Law who were converted to faith in Christ continued to function as priests until the Temple was destroyed. Cf. G. Ricciotti, *Gli Atti degli Apostoli* (Rome: Coletti, 1951), p. 127; J. Renié, *Actes des Apôtres* (Paris: Letouzey, 1949), p. 106; C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Gabalda, 1952), I, 227.

Dix calls it, the result of an internal revolution within the Church of the first century? And was the continuity within that Church, consequently, no more than formal? Are we, as some have claimed, the dupes of an enthusiast named Paul, whose upbringing amid a Gentile environment led him to transform the face of primitive belief in Jesus the Messiah and make of it a hybrid cult closer to polytheistic paganism than to Jewish monotheism?

Dom Gregory Dix, in this, his last book, undertook to answer these questions honestly and soberly. They are questions that demand applied psychology as much as theology; an understanding, that is, of ethnic histories and thought patterns, and Dom Dix has realized this.

Jesus was born into a world in which the Roman who ruled it was but a parvenu, and the Greek, whom the Roman had supplanted, of but little more cultural antiquity. Since the beginnings of civilization in Mesopotamia some three or four thousand years before His birth, dominion over the known world had been in the hands of one or another Syriac power. Syriac is a misleading word but we must use it for lack of a better. What it implies is the fact that all the ancient monarchies which existed between the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Persia shared certain basic ideas about the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life as a whole. Rise and fall these monarchies did, but the psychology of king and subject changed hardly at all. But when, some three hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Alexander the Great defeated the armies of Darius III at Issus, a new psychology, that of the Greek—later to include the Roman and, still later, that of the Celt and Goth—began to influence world history. The Greek, as Dom Dix is eager to point out, did not think like the Jew, or the Persian, or the Egyptian; and where the elements of Syriac thought attempt to survive in the climate of a Greek mind, a translation must take place.

This is what happened within the Church during the first century of its existence. Happened, indeed, because those circumstances which create history forced the issue. We tend to forget that not everything concerning the future of the Church and the development of its doctrine was clear to the small group that began, so bravely, to preach the Good News of Jesus on the first Pentecost. Men are so largely conditioned by their early environment that what they accept consciously in later life is often rejected by the subconscious, which so influences

practice. To those Jews who embraced Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, the refusal of their brothers of the circumcision to join them must have seemed but a hesitation rather than a rejection. How could a Jew, who was so fully aware of the many bonds which bound him to his fellow Jews, believe that they did not see what he saw? Jesus had prepared His disciples for such a turn of events; He had resigned Himself to this hard fact only with bitter tears as He looked down upon the city and the people His human nature loved with a Jewish heart and His divine nature with the consciousness of choice and covenant.

Is it any surprise then that the Jewish Christians realized only with painful agony that their brethren were not now to join them in welcoming the Good News of the New Covenant? But the realization born of this painful agony was the first step toward the translation of their message for the benefit of others. Their conclusion was that of Paul, that by the nonacceptance of the Jews "salvation has come to the Gentiles" (Rom 11:11); and the significance of Jesus' commission to them to preach "to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Lk 24:47) was at last understood. They had indeed begun in Jerusalem, but their failure there had eventually forced them to "go forth" unto Jesus "outside the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb 13:13). The translation of their message—and it was *theirs* for it had been confided to them—was acknowledged as a necessity, not as forced on them by a Jew whose background had influenced him toward paganizing an essentially Jewish theology. James, whose claim to being a Hebrew of the Hebrews was better than Paul's by far, and who lived his whole life in the practice of the Mosaic Law, stated the position of the saddened Jewish Christians when he declared that the process of translation begun by Paul must continue undisturbed (Ac 15:14-21). That Paul himself fully realized the true nature of his task is clear from the way he alludes to it in his Epistle to the Romans. The Gentiles are to be grafted onto the olive tree which belongs, by nature, to the Jews (Rom 11:16-24). The faith of the prophets, consummated in Jesus, is not something to be twisted and turned in order to suit the taste of the Gentile; it is the Gentile who must be made to understand the content of that faith in order to become worthy of receiving it.

For the Jew the Messiah was He who would bring in with a mighty hand the "kingdom of God"—that marvelous order of things "in which God is revealed within human life as the sovereign Lord of all

life" (p. 24). In this the Messiah's action is identifiable with that of God Himself. The function of the Messiah is a divine function. The content of this thoroughly Jewish concept deserves profound meditation, and the riches that it yields surpass all metaphysical speculation. But the Greek mind understood the architecture of reason and not the plummetings of the heart. From the depths of the heart to the heights of reason, then, the idea of Jesus as Messiah had to be brought. St. Paul began the process of translation by identifying Jesus with the creative Wisdom of God, already quasi-hypostasized in the pre-Christian Jewish Wisdom literature. It was an identification that a Jew writing for Jews would probably not have made, not because it was untrue but because it was unnecessary. For the Greek, however, it served as a link to the world of philosophical thought in which he had been trained.

The thesis of Dom Dix that Paul's work was one of translating rather than transforming is borne out by the type of faith which the Christian has in Jesus. It is completely Jewish, not Greek. To the average Greek the gods were very much personalities to be humored for one reason or another. To more subtle minds like Plato's, the idea of God was a cold and distant thing that touched the emotions not one bit. But to the Jew, God was a Person who entered into the whole fabric of daily life, austere at times but lovingly and pleadingly also. Who can read the book of Jeremiah without being moved by the tenderness of God? God, for the Jew, was a Person to be obeyed, yes, but also to be loved; and this is where the Jew and the Greek part company. Undoubtedly some Greeks and some Romans had an affection for their gods, but it was the affection we all have for eccentric friends. Affection can be detached, love never so. And it is this fundamental relation to God that characterizes the Christian. The translation that Paul began was continued and developed in succeeding centuries, but with it went an ever-increasing intensity of intimate fellowship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The ordinary Christian is quite unaware of metaphysical terminology but he knows, loves, and fears God; and in this he far more closely resembles David and Jeremiah than Plato and Aristotle. Thomas Aquinas could realize that his adaptation of Aristotelian philosophy was "as straw" compared to the reality of God, only because his heart was filled with the rich inheritance of the prophets whose teaching Jesus crowned.

When the body of Jesus' faithful was no longer confined to the

prophesied "remnant" but was growing miraculously with Gentile converts, "the living God" came to be more often called "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus," or just "God the Father"; "the Messiah Yeshua" was called "Jesus Christ the Son of God"; the "Nazarenes" became "the Christians"; "the Scriptures" were known as "the Old Testament"; and "the Israel of God" was usually referred to as "the Holy Church." If, then, strictly Jewish terms gradually gave way to terms more understandable for a wider world, into which the Jewish Christians had faithfully carried the gospel, these new terms were not derived from that world but from the very roots of that same gospel. Far from being a "Hellenization," this process of translation was a "Catholicizing" of the Christian faith (p. 109). Undeniably, the new converts brought into the Church many of the external marks of their pagan environment. But the formality of Roman ceremonial and the sensuousness of Greek appeal to the eyes cannot alter the nature of a chosen people bound together and together bound to God. Nor can these translations of a material order distract from the bald fact that on an altar architecturally pagan the Passover lamb of the New Covenant is sacrificed.

Dom Gregory Dix has given the historical steps upon which the process of translation climbed. I have attempted, in this review, to express—in other words than his for the most part—the basic ideas of his work. He has left us with a valuable contribution to a long-neglected and very elusive period of Church history, and his approach to the problems presented by that first-century span of years is, in every case, mature and resolute. If there is any criticism at all to be leveled against the book, it must be of its brevity. The problems the author poses are not only historical and doctrinal but psychological and ethnic as well, and although he is, as already stated, well aware of this and evidently so in the solutions he gives, nevertheless there is room for the less subtle mind to misinterpret and misunderstand. The Foreword to the book makes it quite clear, however, that the author had every intention of rewriting and expanding the manuscript which he himself "did not consider worthy of publication in the form in which he left it." We can be grateful to his literary executors for disagreeing with that too humble judgment.

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